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Restricting religious practice in the era of COVID-19: The case of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tāwahədo community

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This essay follows the publication of an article that Dr Istratii contributed to the Political Theology Network on the 15th of April under the title “[Restricting religious practice in the era of COVID-19: A de-westernised perspective on religious freedom with reference to Greece.](#)” Motivated by similar concerns, the current essay takes a closer look at restrictions affecting religious practice in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tāwahədo community, where measures to respond to the public health crisis have become increasingly

more rigid. While the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tāwahādo* faithful comprise a unique community, they share various elements with their counterparts in Greece, including the deeply intertwined relationship between religious tradition, historical consciousness and personal identity, which means that the faith is prominent on all realms of life. The essay discusses what the prohibition of religious practices might imply for the Church and the faithful, including material and spiritual implications, but also by restricting the activity of the clergy in society. Our objective is to bring these implications to the attention of the Ethiopian government in an effort to ensure that current efforts to contain the spread of the virus in the country are sensitive to the people's religious living.

Like many states in the world, the Ethiopian government promptly responded to contain the spread of the virus outbreak in its territory by [forbidding](#) large public gatherings, including those of a religious nature. The latest state emergency declaration forbids gatherings of more than four people, which has meant that many among the faithful have been unable to continue their religious life as per norm. In some urban centres, such as the capital city Addis Ababa, measures have been most rigidly applied, with believers being turned away if they venture to attend church services. The ban of any gathering over four people should, technically, deem infeasible the sacraments of Baptism, Chrismation, Holy Communion, Holy Matrimony and some funeral services that are typically executed by five people within the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tāwahādo* ecclesiastical tradition. In effect, the ban has been enforced with variability, with many churches continuing Sunday liturgies behind closed doors while livestreaming to the faithful, and some even serving the Holy Communion to a few laypeople if they are able to enter the church's premises.

In similar ways to Greece, prior to the introduction of this prohibition and in the early days of the virus outbreak in Ethiopia, the Standing Holy Synod of the Church stipulated that church services should be administered by a reduced number of priests and deacons, asking the faithful to stay home. Given the faith's prevalence in the everyday life and consciousness of the Orthodox *Tāwahādo* community, even this decision raised some concerns, especially since a significant number of adherents had fasted very rigidly during the Great Lent and expected to conclude it with the Holy Communion. Such responses might have motivated a letter by the Ethiopian Patriarch to the government asking for the Holy Communion to be allowed on Good Thursday and Easter day (ref. no [Δ/Σ/462/15/2012 EC](#)). While restrictions on religious practices were maintained, this brief interlude generated speculations that the initial response of the Standing Holy Synod had been guided by the government, which would suggest an unconstitutional interference. It is important to note that Ethiopia upholds the separation of state and 'religion,' albeit these being [intertwined in complex ways](#).

[Ethiopia's federal sub-division](#) has meant that regional governments responded to the virus outbreak in variable times and ways. The Tigray government, for example, [was the first](#) to introduce a state of emergency in late March, passing a series of decisions that forbade large gatherings, such as weddings and mourning ceremonies, although these did not include any explicit stipulations about church services. In Aksum, where Orthodox Christianity was officially embraced in the fourth century, churches remained open, with attendees following social distancing rules to prevent the spread of the virus. In other places of Ethiopia, including Addis Ababa, the faithful were essentially forced to follow the Church worship during the Holy Week on television. Photos from the past few days show that churches in the capital are being draconically guarded by police to discourage the faithful from entering. In parallel, incidents such as the reported looting of a church (photo below), have caused added concern among the faithful.



(Images of offering boxes belonging to churches, looted of the money they contained)

Source: <https://m.facebook.com/>

Although implemented in non-uniform ways across the country, restrictions to religious life are expected to have important implications for the Church and the faithful, which need to be recognised and carefully addressed by government in parallel to implementing measures to contain the virus. As in the case of Greece, the history of Ethiopia has been closely interwoven with the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tāwahādo* Church (EOTC) and tradition, although the historical association of the faith with the ruling class has resulted in unique dynamics in multi-religious Ethiopia. Among the Orthodox *Tāwahādo* adherents, religious conscience and historical consciousness are to a degree inseparable, and together these largely determine the faithful's sense of identity and belonging. Similar to the Orthodox in Greece, and perhaps to a larger degree in Ethiopia, participating in church services has been part of daily activity and folklore culture. Many of the faithful consistently take part in the weekly Divine Liturgy, although this has been historically preserved to those that the Church considers to be bodily and spiritually pure, primarily children and the very young, the married and the very old. The Eucharist is often described by the faithful as medicine or 'food' for Eternal Life. The children and the youth typically join the weekly Sunday school programme after the liturgy, although religious education has been weakened in recent decades due to the expansion of governmental education and other forces of modernization. Most people have a spiritual father since childhood and throughout their adult lives, whom they meet frequently in the church premises or in their homes when priests visit for the regular religious gatherings. These are only a few of the ways in which the Church is integral to people's everyday lives, demonstrating a faith with clear existential dimensions.

The role of the Church in society and the impact on the faithful

It was mentioned in the previous essay that the Orthodox Church in Greece [expended](#) in 2018 over 121 million euro in philanthropic services, supporting the poor and homeless, single mothers, foreigners and migrants, families with many children, and other vulnerable groups, such as individuals with substance abuse and victims of domestic violence, by means of soup kitchens and ‘agape meals’, shelters, orphanages, endowments and other services and facilities. It was not possible to retrieve equivalent numbers for the EOTC but it is well-known that the Church has been involved in its fair share of philanthropic work. Given the decentralised structure of the EOTC, this has been delivered through the work of local churches and priests, monasteries and monks and nuns and the alms and contributions of the faithful, including the offering of meals in church, monasteries and during religious gatherings. Some monasteries in Ethiopia [might be contributing](#) even to sustainable livelihoods in the surrounding communities.

It is understood that the current restrictions have already interfered with this philanthropic activity (although, they have certainly not impeded it), reducing the alms collected by small churches and monastic centres across Orthodox Ethiopia. Many of the churches rely on the financial contributions collected from the faithful to operate and to pay salaries to the clergy, whom they might be unable to reimburse at this time. Within EOTC ecclesiastical tradition, clergy must marry before becoming priests, which means that priests have dependents to care for. Curtailing the salaries of priests, especially priests outside of urban centres who have lower salaries, could threaten the wellbeing of their usually large families as well. It should also be considered that there are many other individuals who depend on Church-related activities to make a living, such as people who sell candles, incense or other ecclesiastical necessities typically outside of churches.

Beyond these material implications, one must consider the psychological effects and the impact on the pastoral activity of the clergy that such a rigid prohibition might have on the faithful. In Ethiopia, it is not unlikely for Orthodox believers to visit their spiritual father when they face life challenges or problems. When the faithful fall sick, but especially when sickness is sudden and cannot be medically explained, Orthodox Ethiopians will normally ask for prayers to be said on their behalf and will seek to wash with holy water. From the perspective of dedicated adherents, visiting holy places (e.g. monasteries) is central to maintaining emotional, spiritual and physical wellbeing. Moreover, the clergy are often at the forefront of mediating family problems and community conflict. Dr Istratii’s [research in Aksum](#) found that the local clergy were often at the frontline of dealing with issues of conjugal conflict and even family violence, which in most cases they tried to address with sensitivity to the victim’s predicament, despite often contributing via their own discourses in the continuation of certain rigid norms around the conjugal relationship. The influence of religious discourse on societal norms was found to be [complex and non-uniform](#), but it is indisputable that the religious tradition has been potent in local mentalities, attitudes and vernacular life.

A full and genuine assessment of the effects of restricting church activity would also have to consider the more positive impact that faithfulness, and church attendance in particular, might have on the individual, the family and society overall. Already, since the virus outbreak and the imposition of lockdowns, evidence of a rise in [mental health problems](#) and [domestic violence incidents](#) has been reported across the world. Domestic violence is not necessarily the outcome of this close cohabitation, but becomes more acute and threatening where it exists. This is especially pertinent to Ethiopia, with almost [one in three women](#) having faced some type of spousal abuse in their lifetime. Previous studies from North America show that Church attendance [can improve](#) intimate relationships, while faithfulness (and specifically Orthodox beliefs) [is associated](#) with attitudes of forgiveness and conflict resolution. The [study](#) that Dr Istratii conducted in Aksum seemed to consolidate this relationship, with the majority of female research participants affirming that going to church and observing the sacraments made their husbands calmer and more considerate towards them. The implied associations between religious activity, faith and human behaviour in intimate relationships should be understood better and considered in state-led strategies to contain the virus outbreak and to reduce the possible side-effects of the lockdown.